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ABSTRACT

Within the field of child welfare a style of practice has evolved among social workers in small communities and rural areas that captures some of the essential elements of case management, prevention, and early intervention. The practice style represents an adaption to contextual factors in rural areas which include: (1) greater geographic distances to travel to clients; (2) social structures and power bases differing from urban areas; (3) scarcity of formal resources; (4) greater accessibility of local community resources; (5) a sense of powerlessness over policies made in urban centers; (6) high visibility of social workers; (7) extended role demands covering a wide range of problem-solving activity; and (8) separation from professional support systems and traditional agency supports. Practice in rural child welfare settings can promote family empowerment by utilizing parenting adults as primary decision makers, focus on social and ecological factors, link nonprofessional helping systems to families, perform multiple roles, achieve effectiveness indirectly, understand and link with available resources, utilize team work and orchestrate multiple-helping systems, and address educational needs of professional peers and the community. (JW)

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CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IN RURAL AREAS AND SMALL COMMUNITIES

RESEARCH CAPSULE NO. 14

by

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RESEARCH CAPSULE NO. 14: CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE IN RURAL AREAS AND SMALL COMMUNITIES

Within the field of child welfare a style of practice has evolved among social workers in small communities and rural areas that captures some of the essential elements of case management, prevention, and early intervention. The practice style represents an adaptation to contextural factors in rural areas.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Geography. Great distances and lack of mass transportation tend to place the transportation burden on the social worker rather than the client. Home visits become the norem; time becomes more important as a factor in service delivery.

Idiosyncracy of Communities. Rural communities differ in terms of their social structure; the basis of power and influence of decision-makers; the social status systems, values, norms governing personal relationships; and the roles of political officials.

Personalness. Relationships tend to be on a personal rather than organizational basis. Informal rather than formal channels are used for accomplishing social service tasks. Friendships, personal trust, and personally held values are primary variables.

Scarcity of Formal Resources. Rural communities do not have the breadth of formal resources found in urban centers. Linkages for accessing regional resources are difficult to establish.

Easy Accessibility of Local Community Resources. Factors of personalness and visibility contribute to the accessibility of resources extant in the rural community. The visibility of natural helpers, informal relationships with other professionals, personal linkages with civic, fraternal, and other community organizations open possibilities for both direct and indirect service.

Lack of Control Over External Forces. Consistent with governmental and commercial enterprises, most rural social agencies are branch offices of larger state or regional agencies and are strongly affected by policies made in urban centers. Social workers, like other rural inhabitants, have a sense of powerlessness over external forces which have a high degree of control over their lives.

Visibility. Rural and small town inhabitants are highly conscious of the activities and behavior of local social workers. Community surveillance is a key factor in service delivery.

Extensive Role Demands. The rural agency, and therefore the rural social worker, is the center of a wide range of problem-solving activity, regardless of the official function of the agency or officially defined tasks of the worker.

Isolation. The rural worker is separated from professional support systems and traditional agency supports.

TRENDS IN CHILD WELFARE GOALS AND METHODS

The goals that shape child welfare practice are the same in big cities and small towns. As currently formulated, the intent of child welfare services is to achieve permanent, continuous, and stable relationships between children and parenting adults.

Methods of child welfare practice are also changing: the model of helping characterized by an intensive therapeutic relationship with an individual is being supplemented with the case management model. Case management includes the following ingredients: a goal-oriented strategy; an empirically-based and broad needs assessment; a time-limited, comprehensive, written service contract; case advocacy; the creation and coordination of networks of formal and informal resources involving team management and the use of non-professional self-help and other-help groups; social skill training; and continual case monitoring and assessment of case progress against criterion goals.

PRACTICE IN RURAL CHILD WELFARE SETTINGS

Parenting Adults as Primary Decision Makers. This principle would require a shift in power from the worker to the family. Several factors in rural areas promote family empowerment: high visibility reduces the mystique of the helper, and travel distance translates into infrequent contacts and a tendency to avoid the imposition of decisions on parents.

Social and Ecological Assessment. A social and ecological focus has long characterized child welfare practice in rural areas. The physical, social, and economic factors that exert an influence on families are hard to ignore in small communities.

Linking Non-Professional Helping Systems to Families. Although urban workers appear to share a professional bias against self-help groups, rural workers have routinely made use of self-help and other informal resource systems. The tradition of mutual aid and voluntary helping in small communities combine with the absence of specialists to support this approach.

Performing Multiple Roles. The literature describing child welfare practice in small communities includes a broad range of activities: establishing a child abuse council, developing a service network among various agencies and groups, completing a community needs assessment, developing volunteer groups, developing a community education program, working out a team approach, and so on.

Indirect Practice in Rural Child Welfare Settings. In addition efficiency, indirect practice efforts can be judged in terms of their likely effectiveness in achieving the child welfare goals of providing children with stable and nurturing relationships with parenting adults.

Community Assessment. The social worker must understand and link with available resources within the norms of a community, and in relation to social/ecological factors assessed in the participation of the case management model.

Team Work and the Orchestration of Multiple Helping Systems. Population sparsity, the value placed on voluntary helping, and a skeptical view of expert advice have contributed to the development of unique helping systems, which may include natural helpers and self-help groups. Because the community is small the team can exert influence that extends into areas of prevention and early intervention.

Education. At least three different types of education efforts are important: providing information and advocacy, skill training directed toward professional peers or various self-help and other-help individuals and groups, and developing classes dealing with child welfare concerns.

CONCLUSION

In adapting to contextual factors impinging on practice in rural areas, rural child welfare workers have strayed from traditional models of practice. Reports of their practice appearing in the literature have tended to be descriptive rather than conceptual. Wiltse, Wells, and others have recently conceptualized a model - namely, case management - which is consistent with many of the activities, tasks and roles long practiced in rural areas.

Rural child welfare line staff might be described as "lonely innovators". They appear to receive little support, encouragement, or rewards for their activities from the agencies that employ them, or the profession.

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